

A four-day week can work if staff and employers can deal with the challenges

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It sounds like a dream for many people currently working five days a week: how about just doing four days and having a long weekend?

When the weekends feel too short and the pressure of holding down a full-time job pushes workers to the limit, a four-day working week may appear very attractive. How does this happen in practice though, and can it become commonplace? Well, recent news about four-day working week trials show different outcomes.

Results from the [biggest trial](#) in the UK (involving more than 60 companies and nearly 3,000 employees) showed that 89% of participating companies are still implementing the four-day week, and 51% have decided to make it permanent. The study reveals a drop in employees' burnout and fewer people leaving jobs, which is consistent with [other studies](#).

A few days ago, the supermarket chain Asda concluded its own experiment with a four-day working week, [deciding not to continue with it](#).

But at the same time, South Cambridgeshire Council has declared its trial, involving 450 desk staff and refuse collectors, as successful. It claims a [boost in productivity](#), a 39% reduction in staff turnover and estimated savings of £371,500, mostly in staff agency costs, in what was the biggest-ever public sector trial in the UK.

It is important to distinguish between different types of experiments conducted by organizations. Taking these most recent examples, South Cambridgeshire Council's trial was based on a work schedule where staff received 100% of their pay for 80% of their time, with a target of completing 100% of their work.

A similar working-time reduction was central to the larger UK four-day week experiment, where participating companies from a range of sectors and sizes were given the choice of implementing different solutions, maintaining 100% pay with a meaningful reduction in [work time](#).

Can the work physically be done?

Asda's four-day working week trial required squeezing 44 hours into four days rather than five, for the same pay. Employees were asked to work a daily 11-hour shift, and some found this was too physically demanding and exhausting. It was also difficult for those with care responsibilities or those who relied on public transport.

Notably, while Asda has decided not to continue the experiment, it announced that the trial of a flexible 39-hour week (over five days) will [continue until the end of the year](#). Flexible work solutions do not stop at the four-day working week, if organizations are willing to explore them.

It's important to pay attention to the type of feedback and results that are revealed. For instance, the [report](#) on South Cambridgeshire Council's results mostly focus on [performance improvements](#) in key work areas, but the analysis of the results need to include some clear employees' feedback. Staff views are key to understanding the success of these experiments.

An interesting point made by South Cambridgeshire Council is that it trialed the four-day working week because it cannot compete with other employers on salaries alone, and it's important for recruiting new staff and retaining the existing ones. The four-day working week can indeed be part of a package of benefits for employees, and this may be crucial for the public sector when faced with limited resources.

Will it motivate employees?

Nevertheless, we need to consider possible risks in this approach. For example, is it a reason for employers not to offer adequate or higher pay in the middle of a cost of living crisis? Or is it a reason for employees to

work multiple jobs? While the latter is an individual choice, it should not be caused by the former.

The four-day working week, like other flexible-work solutions, should be offered by employers who want to recruit talented and motivated employees, invest in them, and offer them time and opportunities to upskill. All of this will help staff to be more productive in their jobs.

Other European countries have also considered the four-day working week, such as Portugal, which has just completed a [successful six-month trial](#) with 41 companies. In February this year Germany [started its own four-day week trial](#) with 45 companies.

Greece, however, has recently [taken the opposite approach](#). Some companies and businesses providing 24/7 services can now move to a six-day working week instead of the traditional five days (or a 48-hour week instead of 40 hours).

The Greek government has explained the legislation as a way of addressing shortage of skilled workers and low productivity levels. But, interestingly, these are also motives behind the Portuguese and German four-day working week trials.

[Past research](#) has shown that longer working hours and working weeks do not necessarily mean higher productivity. This is true especially in a country where people already work already too long (considering the legally declared worked hours), and more inefficiently, with stagnant wages.

Is it the best flexible option?

In general, the wisdom of a four-day (or six-day) working week as a country-wide approach is highly debatable. Businesses opt for tailored

hybrid approaches to flexible work that are not limited to the four-day working week, and depend also on firms' finances and culture, as we show in our [recent research](#).

Importantly, [workers also have different preferences](#) and make trade-offs with employers. They may call for flexible work patterns that change where, and not just when, they work.

Ultimately, with the right arrangements in place which are tailored to business needs and framed within policies supported by modern governments, companies may manage these changes in work effectively to ensure an engaged and productive workforce.

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